

2

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The 1990s

It is all too easy to forget that the 1990s were *not* just the decade of Cool Britannia. Tony Blair's New Labour only took power in 1997, and the major part of the decade consisted in the slightly embarrassed hangover of a decade of Thatcherism. The 1997 *Vanity Fair* article that launched the 'Cool Britannia' label identified the eminently forgettable face of that lukewarm Britannia as 'gray-flannel, beans-on-toast John Major!'.¹ Major's tenure as prime minister between 1992 and 1997 consolidated Thatcher's break with Britain's post-war consensus, yet failed to develop a national iconography to convert the fall-out of that rupture into a marketable national brand. This brand arrived later in the decade, when New Labour's Third Way spun the realities of imperial decline and rampant deindustrialisation as, somehow, good things – as occasions for entrepreneurialism and a patriotic embrace of a demotic national culture. This culture was emblematised by the Britpop phenomenon, as bands like Blur and Oasis indulged in their eclectic recycling of sounds, styles and fashions from three decades of British music – looking back, but not in anger so much as in nostalgic yearning. When, in one of the iconic images of the decade, Oasis's Noel Gallagher shook hands with Tony Blair at 10 Downing Street in July 1997, the neoliberal reorganisation of the nation that had started in the 1980s finally found its cool.

The major developments in British fiction in the decade, then, germinated in a tepid body politic that could not quite contain centrifugal forces. There was the drive for devolution in Wales and Scotland, culminating in the establishment of regional assemblies in 1997, and there was the increasingly multicultural make-up of Britain – two sociocultural developments that were reflected in a renewed literary interest in questions of identity and belonging. Yet there was another diffusive force that surreptitiously eroded customary notions of identity: as the 1980s had ravaged Britain's industrial basis, capital increasingly came to rely on profit from intangible goods – brands, symbols and cultural products. Literary fictions and the identities they shaped and interrogated increasingly came to operate within a marketplace

that was rapidly colonising British culture. Indeed, the famed instability of identity is not just an aloof theoretical point, but a key feature of British writing and identity formation in the lukewarm interval between the onslaught of neoliberalism under Thatcher and its rebranding as Cool Britannia.

The erosion of national industries offered the backdrop for a resurgence of Scottish writing. Irving Welsh's 1993 debut novel *Trainspotting* illustrates the entanglement of identity affirmation and cultural consumption particularly well. The novel evokes the life world of a group of Edinburgh heroin users, whose diminished lives, as the title suggests, are reduced to that of passive bystanders, as the progress promised by modern industrialisation (symbolised by the train) has long passed them by. The novel is written in non-standard English, which is not to say that it is a straightforward expression of an authentic vernacular experience; in fact, the novel's language combines a transcribed (and thus less than authentic) Edinburgh vernacular, working-class demotic, various subcultural elements, as well as standard English. The characters' experience is thoroughly saturated by a globalised popular culture. The novel opens on a scene in which Mark Renton, the novel's main narrator, and his friend Sick Boy are watching a Jean-Claude Van Damme movie: 'As happens in such movies, they started oaf wi an obligatory dramatic opening. Then the next phase ay the picture involved building up the tension through introducing the dastardly villain and sticking the weak plot thegither.'² This insight into the genericity of such rote cultural products does not serve as a metafictional device that elevates the narrator or the novel above popular culture, but only as an index of that culture's pervasiveness. The novel's Scottishness, that is, is a thoroughly 'Americanised Scottishness' that makes it more easily accessible for broad audiences.³ This is not unlike the strategy deployed in Nick Hornby's 1995 novel *High Fidelity*, whose narrator, music snob Rob Fleming, fills his story of relational alienation with pop-cultural signifiers and intermittent top five lists ('five best side one track ones of all time'! 'Top five subtitled films!').⁴ Rather than testifying to neurotic self-obsession, this display of cultural saturation ultimately comes to restore Rob's romantic relationship and his professional identity (as a DJ rather than a small record shop owner); at the same time, this curatorial (and inescapably backward-looking) mode invites readers to indulge their own cultural savvy. Already in 1992, Hornby's football fan memoir *Fever Pitch*, about his life as an Arsenal fan, had repurposed that other key vernacular of 1990s Britain, English football, as a marker of cool and a signifier of switched-on masculinity.

The afterlife of *Trainspotting* would bear out this pop cultural reach: the 1996 film version and the white and orange aesthetic of its posters became

popular icons, while Welsh himself became a celebrity in Britain's booming magazine culture, which often promoted an anti-intellectual, alcohol-fuelled culture of 'laddism'. Such commercialisation does not equal outright diminishment, neither for *Trainspotting's* characters nor for Welsh's literary project. For all the brutality, squalor and madness, the lives of the novel's skagboys intimate a tentative sense of togetherness and community – which is significant in the wake of Thatcher's infamous declaration that 'there is no such thing as society', only 'individual men and women' and 'families'.⁵ Welsh himself continued to write challenging fiction: his 1998 novel *Filth* features the voice of a tapeworm, which also typographically comes to disturb the story of its host, the psychotic Detective Sergeant Bruce Robertson. If the silly text balloons in which this voice is captured save this playful device from high modernist seriousness, they yet evince Welsh's resistance to the easy consumption of his literary voices as authentic expressions of a particular ethos and identity.

Such an intimation of a sense of community that cuts across traditional families and social categories also emerges in Alan Warner's 1995 debut *Morvern Callar*. The novel begins with a radical evisceration of the couple form, as the eponymous protagonist, a young supermarket employee, wakes up next to the corpse of her boyfriend, who has committed suicide (and is ominously referred to as a capitalised 'He' and 'Him'). The result is a sense of release – 'He couldnt object so I lit a Silk Cut' – that yet remains vague: 'A sort of wave of something was going across me.'⁶ Morvern walks out on her life in a remote Highland sea-port town and makes her way through the European rave scene – a trajectory sustained by her deadpan, blank and decidedly cool interior monologue. Morvern's short, clipped sentences record the actions of the omnipresent 'I', yet the story reaches out for a sense of togetherness beyond the death of 'Him'. The final scene finds Morvern 'all sicked up on [a] church floor' – a church, we assume, left evacuated by 'Him' – pregnant with '[t]he child of the raves', with 'both hands on [her] tummy at the life there, the life growing right there'. Morvern ends the novel by accepting this life, which the novel refers to as 'queerly familiar'.⁷

In a monologue made famous by the band Underworld on the *Trainspotting* soundtrack, Mark Renton formulates a comparable commitment to a somewhat queered life – a life of unemployment and excess in which traditional templates for masculinity have been rendered inoperative: 'Choose us. Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting oan a couch ... Choose life. Well, ah choose no tae choose life. If the cunts cannae handle that, it's thair fuckin problem ... ah jist intend tae keep right on to the end of the road.'⁸ Just as for Morvern, this constitutes a vague

commitment rather than a definite plan, as becomes clear in Warner's beautiful train wreck of a sequel to *Morvern Callar*, *These Demented Lands* (1998), which finds Morvern on a Scottish island, surrounded by a cast of quasi-allegorical characters in a symbolically resonant landscape. Somehow, the child conceived in the early 1990s is finally born at the consummation of the millennium and is referred to as 'the Messiah';⁹ the bloated symbolism is as much a mark of Warner's grandiose ambition as of the provisional nature of fiction's imagined alternatives to a demented society.

Like Morvern, the protagonist of James Kelman's Booker-Prize-winning *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994) wakes up in a 'queerly familiar' place: hungover, without a clear memory of the previous days, and wearing strange clothes on the streets of Glasgow (and not even knowing yet that his partner has left him), Sammy gets into a fight with two 'sodgers' (policemen), gets himself arrested and discovers he has become blind. Kelman's third-person stream-of-consciousness adopts a Glaswegian working-class accent, and it is more seriously committed to authentically rendering a raw vernacular experience (which is also Kelman's own, as a working-class Glaswegian who left school at the age of 15) than Warner's or Welsh's voices. The novel signals its resistance to commodification on its very first pages, when it shows how the defeated Sammy becomes part of an urban spectacle catering to 'tourists' or 'strangers to the city for some big fucking business event', 'courtesy of the town council promotion office', who consume the image of working-class debauchery as part of the gritty reality of city life.¹⁰ The trope of blindness radically excludes Sammy, as the representative of working-class life, from such ocular consumption, and it allows Kelman to register his antagonism to the recuperation of working-class voices, cultures and experiences as part of the creative economy that began booming in the 1990s. The scene offers a surreptitious comment on Glasgow's status as a European Capital of Culture in 1990, which was just one example of a wave of inner-city renewal and city marketing that also radically altered the make-up and the demographics of places like Birmingham, Manchester and Cardiff. Such a capitalist colonisation of creativity, Kelman suggests, even converts suffering into a commodity (which is not to say that *How Late It Was, How Late* is not itself repackaging economic deprivation and social marginalisation as an experience to be consumed). The same antagonistic logic was on display in the controversy besetting the novel's election for the Booker Prize, in which one jury member and parts of the press objected to the vulgarity of the novel's language (especially its generous use of four-letter words) and the marginality and squalor of the life-world it depicted. The jury member complained that 'Kelman is deeply inaccessible for a lot of people',¹¹

showing that the literary field continued to resist a demotic writing style that stubbornly declines its unwritten rules.

This is not to say that the literary field cannot accommodate difference: in between the seminal achievements of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), the 1990s saw an increasing mainstreaming of ethnically diverse British writing. In his Booker Prize Acceptance Speech, Kelman situates his own working-class fiction as 'part of a much wider process – or movement – towards decolonisation and self-determination', a 'tradition' that assumes '[t]he validity of indigenous culture' and defends 'against cultural assimilation'.¹² That ethnic – and, as we will see, sexual – diversity were much more easily absorbed by the literary field than the non-middle-class experiences Kelman records testifies to the existence of different differences in a literary marketplace that found it easier to accommodate cultural diversity than class difference.

In Hanif Kureishi's 1990 novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, ethnic differences are playful signifiers rather than stable identities. Having become a reluctant spokesperson for Asian Britain in the 1980s on the strength of successful plays and films like *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Kureishi launches his first novel as an exuberant refusal of a role 'as public relations officer, as hired liar'.¹³ Instead, we get the messy and amusing complexity of the life of Karim, the novel's narrator of a mixed British and Indian background, and his father Haroon. Both are picaresque characters: Karim notes that his father 'taught [him] to flirt with everyone [he] met, girls and boys alike' and to see 'charm' as 'the primary social grace', a capacity that leads Haroon to a gig as a kind of therapeutic healer and to a marriage-destroying affair.¹⁴ Both achievements, however questionable, capitalise on Haroon's ethnic identity. Most of the novel consists of the story of Karim's *Bildung*, which takes him from his South London suburb to London (with a dejected detour through New York), and which sees him aspire to a career in the theatre. This occupation is no coincidence: it underlines Kureishi's investment (echoing that of Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses*) in the volatile nature of identity – as something to be enacted rather than inherited. Still, this changeability is thwarted by hegemonic expectations and stereotypes, as Karim finds himself typecast as Mowgli in *The Jungle Book* because he is 'dark-skinned ... small and wiry'.¹⁵ Forcing a loin-cloth and brown make-up on him, the producer reminds him he is 'cast for authenticity and not for experience'.¹⁶ If the production gives Karim a first whiff of success, it leaves him open to criticism from his friend Jamila, who finds the play's depiction of race relations 'completely neo-fascist' and 'disgusting'.¹⁷ If different identities are on offer, then, they are not necessarily compatible.

For all its brashness and humour, *The Buddha* remains ultimately undecided about the liberating potential of identity performances. The most important element in the novel's famous opening sentence – 'My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost'¹⁸ – is not the quaint obsolete Britishness of the phrase 'born and bred' or the clear echo of Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, a resonance that yet underlines the importance of American literature and culture for Karim; it is the 'almost' that points to a residue of liberty and open-endedness, to a certain freedom to escape birth and breeding, or indeed the compulsive force of language suggested by the alliteration. Even if Karim finds himself slotted in an identitarian niche, the novel gestures to the indeterminate yet essentially open-ended forces of pop music and sexuality – to, that is, vibes, styles and experiences rather than vision. It is pop music that allows Karim's teenage crush Charlie to reinvent himself as a punk; it allows Karim and his later girlfriend Eleanor to come together; and it allows the young Karim to negotiate his own Englishness by 'study[ing] *Melody Maker* and *NME*'.¹⁹ Pop culture is not just an occasion for consumption (as in Welsh), for ecstasy (as in Warner) or for snobbism (as in Hornby), but for cultural negotiation. Apart from its investment in pop music, the novel also infamously represents bisexuality and promiscuity; still, it registers its scepticism about the liberating potential of sexual and musical experience by ending at the election in 1979 – the election that would jumpstart the neoliberalisation of British society.

This scepticism extends to Kureishi's 1995 novel *The Black Album*. Like *The Buddha*, *The Black Album* drops its protagonist, Shahid Hasan, in London; yet the earlier novel's flexible, smart and lively first-person narration makes way for a more didactic and analytical third-person perspective (and such a sparse and gritty mode is more typical of literary engagements with multiculturalism in the 1990s than, say, the exuberance of Rushdie or the formal experiments of Windrush generation novelists such as Sam Selvon and Wilson Harris). *The Black Album* is a 'condition of England' novel, and the condition is a complicated one. Hasan is confronted by the twin temptations of sexual and intellectual liberation – personified by his university lecturer Deedee Osgood – and communitarian belonging – embodied by a group of fundamentalist Muslims who, in the novel's 1989, gather to burn a book that remains unnamed yet is clearly Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Five years after *The Black Album*, the famous Bradford demonstration against the publication of Rushdie's book would become the object of good-natured satire in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, but Kureishi emphasises that ignorant fundamentalism (a topic also explored in his 1998 film *My Son the Fanatic*) is rooted in the social and identitarian ills that plague Britain.

Neither the unbearable whiteness of left-wing cultural politics nor the bigotry of religious fundamentalism are tenable existential options, yet the novel makes them visible as regrettable but understandable responses to a sense of disorientation and rootlessness. It is this rueful insight that makes the novel's official commitment to hybridity and plurality less than confident; if Shahid's post-coital surroundings strike him as full of 'sexual tension', 'enticement and fascination . . . everywhere', this offers only a temporary enchantment, no solution.²⁰

One of the novel's main emblems of hybridity is the musician Prince, from one of whose albums the book takes its title. Prince's protean racial, artistic and sexual identity stands for a mode of hybridity the novel cannot fully bring itself to believe in. In the year *The Black Album* was published, Britpop bands Blur and Oasis fought a cynically staged and artificially hyped chart battle by releasing major singles on the same day that not only sold records, but also a particular version of Englishness that was decidedly less hybrid than the one *The Black Album* wants to believe in. When New Labour comes to institute that image of British cool on a political level, London is no longer figured as the complex, maddeningly contradictory multicultural site of Kureishi's novels, but what the *Vanity Fair* article that coined the 'Cool Britannia' label called 'a city in glorious thrall to a thriving youth culture', 'the place to which we must all look to learn how to act, think, and dress'.²¹ Anticipating this contrived consensus, *The Black Album* ends by investing love – the love of Shahid and Deedee – with whatever redemptive value remains, '[u]ntil it stops being fun'.²² Significantly, Kureishi's next novel, *Intimacy* (1998), is a barely disguised autobiographical work that chronicles the writer's painful divorce.

Caryl Phillips's novels of the 1990s offer an account of the plurality of Britishness that is not sublimated as midlife crisis. Born in the West Indies, Phillips in the 1990s divided his time between his native St Kitts, England, where he was raised and educated, and the United States, where he would end up teaching. Phillips's fiction and essays situate the question of British belonging in a resolutely transcultural perspective (even if he maintains that his 'primary axis of frustration' invariably lies between the Caribbean and Britain²³); as such, he radically explodes the category of Black British literature, which in the 1980s often served as a catch-all phrase to name writing by people of Asian, West Indian and African descent. Often opposed to post-colonial and migrant writing traditions, the term loses its coherence when confronted with the vast scope of Phillips's imagination and archival labour. This resolutely dispersed approach is especially on display in *The Nature of Blood* (1997), which juxtaposes (without quite interweaving) different narrative strands: the story of Eva, a traumatised survivor of a Nazi concentration camp; a retelling of the story of Othello; an account of anti-Semitic violence in

fifteenth-century Italy; and the story of Gerry, a British soldier who asks Eva to marry him, which uncomfortably connects the novel's history of violence to British history (and thereby revises a triumphalist imperialist nostalgia centring on 'two world wars and one world cup'). The novel does not make the relations between black suffering and Jewish oppression explicit – as a work of what has been called 'comparison literature',²⁴ it provides reflection and engagement rather than causal explanations. Phillips's novels share this commitment with the stories of displacement of W. G. Sebald, a German author who taught at the University of East Anglia. If *The Emigrants* (1992; English 1996) juxtaposes four loosely related stories of (mostly Jewish) German exiles in the war-torn twentieth century, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995; English 1998) strings together different episodes in a planetary history of suffering through the narrator's walking tour through East Anglia: British imperialism, modern science, the Holocaust, but also environmental devastation – 'many ages are superimposed here and coexist'.²⁵ Sebald's signature combination of meandering text and photographs serves to foreground questions of evidentiality and documentary veracity.

The earlier *Crossing the River* (1993) already showcases Phillips's talent for arranging voices in ways that evoke (rather than determine) entangled histories of suffering – in this case, the dislocations suffered by people of colour who have nominally escaped slavery, yet remain constrained by racial oppression. Ranging from the mid-eighteenth century to the post-war period, and expanding its geographical scope from Africa over the United States to Britain, the novel is as epic in scope as *The Nature of Blood*, even if its ending more optimistically gestures towards a diasporic community. *Cambridge* (1991), which combines the voices of the eponymous slave and his English mistress Emily, also invokes the suffering of uprootedness – an intuition that, as we saw, compromises Kureishi's affirmation of hybridity and that is central to Phillips's work.

Phillips's historical fiction crystallises a number of concerns around the tenuous place of postmodernism in British literature. Postmodernism was always a foreign import in Britain: having been developed in response to American socioeconomic realities in the 1970s, it found little traction in Britain until Thatcherism brought British socioeconomic life in line with that in the United States.²⁶ And even then, a postmodern emphasis on disorientation, uncertainty and the proliferation of images was more often than not framed by a realist commitment, as in the work of Julian Barnes or Peter Ackroyd. Phillips's novels, for all their experiments with historical formats – diaries, testaments, journals, history books, official reports – consist of eminently accessible and realistic voices (even if it is the realism proper to the psyche of traumatised Holocaust survivors).

What is more, Phillips's interest in history dovetails with the remarkable popularity in the 1990s of historical fiction (see Chapter 9), even if his history of the present runs deeper and broader than that in, for instance, Kureishi's novels of the recent past (the 1970s in *The Buddha*, the 1980s in *The Black Album*) or a novel like Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up?* (1994), a satire of Thatcher's break-up of the nation narrated through the disintegration of the Winshaw clan that indulges in genre elements (slasher film, detective story, comedy, Gothic) in a much more playful way than Phillips's novels. Yet a characteristic of postmodernism is that the question of literary seriousness becomes properly undecidable, as revisions of the past become indistinguishable from 'pastiche' or an indulgence in eclecticism – a tendency compounded in the 1990s by the unprecedented alliances between literature, film and television, which further blur the boundaries between art and mass entertainment (see Chapter 10). The clearest example of such confusion outside the literary domain is the rise of the Young British Artists. Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* consists of a shark in formaldehyde in a vitrine, and the question of whether this is a serious engagement with art history, a canny gimmick, an investment vehicle for art collector Charles Saatchi or all of these things at once becomes properly unanswerable. Which is annoying, but which is, as we will see, not necessarily unproductive.

A. S. Byatt's Booker-Prize-winning *Possession* (1990) indulges in postmodern pastiche and metafictional sophistication, yet mobilises these stylistic features for a decidedly traditional literary project. The book, subtitled 'A Romance', tells the story of how two contemporary scholars of Victorian literature discover the illicit love affair between their scholarly objects, the (fictional) Victorian poets Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte, only to show how that love spills over into the sexual attraction between the two contemporary scholars. The novel not only riffs on the template of the romance (or, indeed, of the confident omniscience of the Victorian novel), but it also presents impressively convincing pastiches of Ash's and LaMotte's poetry, diaries and letters. The novel's plot evinces a strong commitment to the potency of literature, which is compounded by the negative portrayal of literary theory, academic pettiness and cynical reading modes that resist the pleasures of literature – and, the novel suggests, disable love. Love of literature, and especially for its capacity to vividly evoke the past, for Byatt, becomes a placeholder for love as such, and the association between literariness, historical difference and romance exemplifies how British postmodernism often domesticates metafiction as nostalgic bookishness.

Byatt's later *The Biographer's Tale* (2000) tells the story of a Phineas G. Nanson, a graduate student who abandons the mortifying austerities of

literary theory for the supposedly more visceral rewards of the study of biography; again, the textual nature of this interest does not spoil its reality effect (Phineas turns to biography because he feels ‘an urgent need for a life full of *things* . . . the shining *solidity* of a world full of facts’²⁷), as his life comes to repeat the patterns of the life of the author he studies. Metatextual sophistication, again, comes to inform a keener sense of historical reality. This investment in pleasurable experiences of historical difference (which override metafictional scepticism) is ultimately not very different from the projects of two other mildly metafictional Booker-Prize-winning historical novel projects. Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy (*The Ghost Road*, the third instalment, won the Booker in 1995) centres on a shell-shock treatment hospital during the First World War, where experimental psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers treats, among others, poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. The novels’ reliance on written accounts of the war and the history of psychiatry (also, anachronistically, on elements that post-date the events depicted), while foregrounding textual mediation, also augment their reality effect. Especially in the first novel in the trilogy, the focus on trauma – a term that names a sudden, overwhelming, immediate experience that yet withdraws from clear knowledge – overrides concerns over historical authenticity and scepticism over the power of language to capture the horrors of war (much as the focus on love bridges historical distance in *Possession*).

Canadian author Michael Ondaatje’s 1992 *The English Patient* similarly de-glamorises war through a revision of masculine ideals by centring on the mutilated, denationalised and immobilised body of a mysterious patient in the aftermath of the Second World War. Metafictional shifts and often classical intertexts (turning the Italian landscape into a palimpsest rather than a secure background) destabilise the account of a patient who turns out not to be English, but rather Almásy, a Hungarian who has collaborated with both British and German forces, and, like the rest of the scarred characters assembled in an Italian villa, has overcome national belonging. This transcendence is a curse as much as it is a liberation; it leads Kip, a servant of Indian descent, to almost kill Almásy in response to news about the bombing of Hiroshima, reasoning that ‘[w]hen you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman’ – which means that the non-English English patient is guilty by association after all.²⁸ The amnesic, traumatised body at the centre of the novel recalls Barker’s mobilisation of trauma, while the painstaking reconstruction of his story through diaries (sometimes morphine-induced), memories and other forms of evidence combined with an authoritative omniscient narrator recalls Byatt’s approach, as does the uncynical belief in the love-generating force of literature: Almásy’s love for Katherine, the love of his life, is triggered by her voice as she reads aloud

from *Paradise Lost* – an event that all at once turns him into a lover of literature. It was a small step, then, for the immensely successful movie adaptation to twist a metafictional text into a consummate love story.

The work of Jeanette Winterson tests the possibilities of postmodern form for more daring explorations of sexuality and gender. If her novels from the 1980s (especially *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* [1985] and *Sexing the Cherry* [1989]) already used playful postmodern techniques – fantasy and time travel, fairy tales and intertextuality – to unsettle gender norms and make visible a queer sexuality, her novels of the 1990s even more ambitiously position these concerns in terms of the struggle between literature and competing intellectual frameworks. *Written on the Body* is organised around the (somewhat too emphatically proclaimed) conceit of a genderless narrator, forcing readers to suspend their customary projection of gender stereotypes. Such a denaturalisation of extant categories and a search for novel discourses of the body inform the account of the narrator's affair with Louise, which ends when Louise's leukaemia forces her to return to her oncologist husband. If Ondaatje uses the traumatised body to invite the inscription of other people's stories, Winterson shows how a traumatised narrator draws on anatomic discourse to inscribe a diseased body it can no longer possess. The narrator begins to study anatomy, and '[w]ithin the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self', the novel recovers 'a love-poem to Louise'.²⁹ At once lyrical and analytical, scientific and erotic, *Written on the Body* updates the history of romance to make room for the materialist language of biology and medicine. In this respect, it resembles Jim Crace's 1999 novel *Being Dead*, which reconstructs the love story of a couple of 'doctors of zoology' who are randomly killed on the beach and intertwines it with a surprisingly tender account of the disintegration of their bodies and their intermingling with dead matter.³⁰ The entanglement of human love and biological decomposition paradoxically offers what Crace calls '[a] narrative of comfort for atheists'³¹ – the comfort that death is not the end, but simply more life, even if that life is no longer human.

Winterson's 1997 novel *Gut Symmetries* is even more intellectually promiscuous. It draws on post-Newtonian physics – string theory, quantum physics – and other explanatory thought systems – tarot cards, alchemy – to map the warped spaces in which gut meets GUT: the love triangle between Alice, Jove and Stella at the heart of the story is imbricated with the scientific ambition to draw up a General Unified Theory of everything. The different theories expound the unpredictability and instability of things: 'What should be stable, shifts. What I am told is solid, slips.'³² Such volatility makes it possible for Alice and Stella to suddenly feel

attracted to each other in what is the erotic equivalent of a quantum event. As in *Written on the Body*, Winterson enlists scientific discourses to design a new sensual language, one that codes sexuality and gendered life as fluid processes rather than fixed realities. Even if Winterson's novel is a much more playful and ironic exercise, this interest in the resonances between literature and science recurs in Nicholas Mosley's bewildering *Hopeful Monsters* (1990). The novel, the fifth and most celebrated part of Mosley's *Catastrophe Practice* series, covers nothing less than the main scientific, philosophical and sociopolitical shifts of the twentieth century. Much more cerebral than Winterson's work, the novel is nevertheless obsessed with the question of how to wrestle a residue of indeterminacy and freedom from a universe that becomes increasingly predictable and knowable – to find what the novel, in a term borrowed from evolutionary biology, calls a 'hopeful monster': a creature 'born perhaps slightly before [its] time', and thus offering a possible relief from the waste and loss that besets natural selection.³³ The experiment remains confined to salamanders, and there is little that indicates the sober comfort that a novel like *Being Dead* offers or the ecstasy that Winterson's fiction evokes.

A bio-literary experiment that tests the limits of sexuality and love: this is one way to characterise A. L. Kennedy's 1995 novel *So I Am Glad*. One of the freshest and most versatile voices to emerge from Scotland in the 1990s, Kennedy peoples her novels and short stories (she has also written drama, screenplays, and cultural and literary journalism, and is an accomplished stand-up comedian) with 'the emotionally and politically disenfranchised and dispossessed'.³⁴ *So I Am Glad* is narrated by Jennifer, a young woman who is disturbingly unemotional and uninvolved – 'unable to share in the emotional payoff, to feel the benefits of close company and sex'.³⁵ Yet the novel forces this unlikely test subject into a love relationship with a reincarnation of the seventeenth-century French writer and duelist Cyrano De Bergerac – an encounter between natural limitation and supernatural invention that strains the protocols of human romance as we thought we knew it. The novel underlines that Jennifer's lack of emotion is a material fact – she imagines emotions as a colony of moles, a reference to Bergerac's quaint theory of 'universal mitology', which surmises that the human is basically a colony of smaller animals, but also to the molecules that make up humans' animal DNA.³⁶ The story, in other words, becomes a lab for the encounter of not-quite-human forces and desires. The result is that the narrator's deadpan and flat registration of events paradoxically activates a sense of affective unease and humour that exceeds the traditional emotional portfolio of the romance novel – the protocols of 'being furious and chipper, nostalgic, nauseous, glum and all the rest'.³⁷

Kennedy's stories often generate a sense of intimacy through the power of fiction, lying or deceit, and through narrators' overt manipulation of information (as in the blending of past and present in her first novel, *Looking for the Possible Dance* [1993]).

As the novel ends on a metafictional twist that destabilises the parameters of the experiment that constitutes it, readers realise that the story, for all its ontological instability, has nevertheless performed its magic, and that they themselves have been part of this provisional affective community. In Kennedy's third novel, *Everything You Need* (1999), writing (and reading) serve as activities that bring an estranged father and his daughter together, which converts the text of the novel into an extended declaration of love. This mode of operation recalls the work of Janice Galloway, which similarly features emotionally derelict female characters – on a road trip to France reminiscing about dysfunctional past relationships (in *Foreign Parts* [1994]) or stuck in an armchair and almost too depressed to muster the courage to survive (in *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* [1989]). As in Kennedy, wry humour and the creative potential of language (in the case of Galloway, often through collage and typographical experimentation) allow the novels (and, more conditionally, also the characters) to escape their emotional stultification. If Galloway's writing is, to adopt Winterson's phrase, writing 'on the body', it also involves overwriting the always already inscribed female body. In her first novel, for instance, *Joy Stone*, the main character, becomes anorexic and bulimic as a response to the gendered social injunction to be sexually attractive; the novel confronts this condition by mobilising the material elements of the literary text through the emphasis on irregular typography and various textual formats.

Imagining romance at the border of the human (in Kennedy) or patriarchy (in Galloway), and unflinchingly imagining forms of sexual violence, these novels find a tonality that is capacious and intractable rather than simply lukewarm or cool – and much too unsettling to be straightforwardly British or Scottish. The variety and intensity of literary production on the British islands in the 1990s testifies to a sense of disorientation that is both aesthetic and political. Aesthetic, in that the customary templates of, for instance, Black British writing and working-class fiction had lost traction, and the protocols of postmodernity often proved stale upon arrival. Political, in that the ascent of neoliberalism was, for most of the decade, not yet consolidated as a Third Way one could confidently join or oppose, and was more often celebrated for its role in revitalising Britain's creative industries than criticised for furthering the erosion of the post-war consensus. If the 1990s are indeed 'the most politically tedious decade in living memory',³⁸ their literary fiction is a rare place where that tedium is rendered memorable at all.

Notes

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4. N. Hornby, *High Fidelity* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000), pp. 147 and 28.
5. D. Keay, 'Margaret Thatcher Interviewed in Women's Own' (1987), *Margaret thatcher.org*.
6. A. Warner, *Morvern Callar* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 1.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 227–9.
8. Warner, *Morvern Callar*, p. 187.
9. A. Warner, *These Demented Lands* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 212.
10. J. Kelman, *How Late It Was, How Late* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 2.
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12. J. Kelman, 'Elitists Slurs Are Racism by Another Name', *Scotland on Sunday: Spectrum Supplement* (16 October 1994), p. 2.
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14. H. Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 7.
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16. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
20. H. Kureishi, *The Black Album* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 124.
21. D. Kamp, 'London Swings! Again!', *Vanity Fair* (March 1997).
22. Kureishi, *The Black Album*, p. 276.
23. C. Phillips, 'Interview with Maya Jaggi' in Susheila Nasta (ed.), *Writing across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 122.
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27. A. S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 4 (emphases in the original).
28. M. Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 304.
29. J. Winterson, *Written on the Body* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 111.
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31. A. Lawless, 'The Poet of Prose: Jim Crace in Interview', *Three Monkeys Online* (no date).
32. J. Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* (London: Granta, 1998), p. 10.
33. N. Mosley, *Hopeful Monsters* (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive, 2000), p. 71.

34. S. Dunnigan, 'A. L. Kennedy's Longer Fiction: Articulate Grace' in Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (eds), *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 154.
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37. Kennedy, *So I Am Glad*, p. 5.
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